

Brighter Futures For Children: Fostering Service

Brighter Futures For Children Limited

Reading Borough Council, Bridge Street, Reading, Berkshire RG1 2LU

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency was registered with Ofsted in January 2019. It was formerly part of Reading Borough Council and is now part of Brighter Futures for Children Limited and holds responsibility for providing Brighter Futures for Children mainstream fostering services.

The agency offers short- and long-term, emergency, and parent and child placements. There are currently 48 children living in 56 fostering households.

The manager registered with Ofsted on 31 January 2019.

Inspection dates: 22 to 26 July 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 18 January 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make good progress because of the nurturing care they receive from experienced and well-informed foster carers. Children appreciate the support they receive from their foster carers and describe them as 'amazing', 'kind' and 'fabulous'. The relationships between children and their foster carers are built on trust, commitment and a belief that children can achieve well in life.

Children's experiences have enriched their lives because they are included in special events, holidays and celebrations with their foster families. This promotes a sense of belonging for children. Creating long-term stability for children is a strength of the agency.

Older children are supported to develop age-appropriate independence skills. Most children successfully secure a college or university place when they leave school. Some who have moved on to adulthood remain in contact with their foster family. One child said they want to return 'home' from university in holidays.

Younger children are attending education and achieving well. As a result of their positive experiences, children's confidence and self-esteem improve. For example, one child has recently played a lead role in a school play. Others are exceeding expectations in their sporting abilities because of the commitment of foster carers who transport them to, and support and encourage their engagement in, events.

The health and well-being of children constitute a priority for foster carers and the agency. Children's health needs are met through regular attendance at appointments, with specialist treatment being resourced where necessary.

There is an inclusive culture in this agency. Foster carers engage children in conversations about gender, sexuality, culture and religion. Children approach their foster carers for advice and guidance. This means children have a safe space to discuss their views and wishes and ask questions.

Foster carers advocate for children to ensure they are receiving the expected level of support from other agencies involved in their care planning. However, actions identified in multi-agency meetings are not always followed up by the fostering agency. This creates drift and prevents the leadership team from having full awareness of the progress being made towards agreed actions.

The agency actively encourages foster carers' birth children to share their views about what it is like to live in a family that fosters. Group activities and social events provide dedicated opportunities for them to share their experiences.

Foster carers proactively support children having time with their birth family. This enables children to retain their identity and maintain connections to those that are important to them.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children say they feel safe and that their foster carers help them understand how to stay safe. When any concerns about children's safety and well-being arise, foster carers alert agency staff and managers without delay. There are effective working relationships between the agency, foster carers and external professionals that help to ensure children's protection.

Foster carers receive monthly supervision. However, there are significant delays between supervision meetings and supervising social workers sharing records with foster carers. This prevents the registered manager from being able to review the quality and reflection of these sessions in a timely way. Additionally, foster carers cannot swiftly review agreed actions. The registered manager has recognised this shortfall and has put a plan in place to address it.

Foster carers have completed all mandatory training and are encouraged to attend bespoke training that enables them to meet the specific needs of the children they care for. Nonetheless, there is limited reflection, discussion and development opportunities recorded in their annual reviews or daily recording logs.

Staff are appropriately qualified and have the necessary skills to support foster carers to safeguard children effectively. However, training opportunities are limited in other areas; for example, staff do not complete the same level of training as some foster carers. This inhibits informed discussions during visits and supervision because foster carers may be more informed and up to date with new initiatives and research.

Missing-from-care episodes are rare. When they do occur, there is a robust, well-coordinated response to ensure that children return safely. Foster carers receive support from their supervising social workers to maintain stability for children in times of crisis. Foster carers can access support from the out of hours service if significant concerns arise during evenings and weekends.

When concerns arise regarding foster carers, they are managed effectively by the registered manager. Clear records are kept, and outcomes are shared via management and team meetings. This enables reflection and shared understanding among the team to support learning.

Children know how to complain and are actively encouraged by their foster carers when they want to raise their concerns and worries. Allegations against foster carers are generally managed well. However, on one occasion, the registered manager and staff failed to respond swiftly to an allegation, which caused unnecessary delay before all those involved got the support that they needed.

The leadership team notifies Ofsted as required when serious incidents occur. This enables the regulator to ensure that there has been a robust response.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The agency has an experienced registered manager who is supported by a knowledgeable responsible individual. The leadership team has a clear and realistic vision for the agency. A recent restructure has provided opportunity to recruit to specialist roles to enhance the current staff team, for example through the introduction of a person who has responsibility for recruitment and retention of foster carers.

The staff team is cohesive and well established. Staff have a wealth of experience and knowledge that they share with each other. As a result, foster carers benefit from receiving well-informed, consistent support. Foster carers describe supervising social workers as 'committed' and 'supportive'.

The leadership team has made good use of recent monitoring activity to identify areas where practice could be improved. They have put action plans in place to address shortfalls. However, some actions have not been carried out, for example requesting information from foster carers and following up actions from foster carer annual reviews and team meetings.

The fostering panel consists of appropriately qualified and experienced members but lacks diversity, gender balance and a care-experienced young person. This has a negative impact on the level of professional curiosity and informed appropriate challenge to foster carers attending panel.

Not all panel reports are quality assured effectively to ensure that foster carers receive reports that are free from grammatical and factual errors. Children's views, including those of birth children, are often omitted from the report. This prevents the panel members from exploring all issues of concern or identifying additional support that may be necessary to support children and foster carers.

The agency decision-maker provides clarity and scrutiny to decision-making. All recommendations are in line with the agency's overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care.

Not all staff receive regular practice-related supervision. This limits opportunities for reflection, professional curiosity and case oversight by the registered manager. Despite the leadership team prioritising this, there are gaps. This prevents staff from being able to formally record children's progress, reflect on safeguarding incidents and discuss their own emotional well-being.

The registered manager completes their own quality of care review in collaboration with the leadership team via regular management meetings. This enables clarity about how to further improve and develop the service.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- The panel chair should ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.7)
- Foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.5)
- Each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. The frequency of meetings for short-break foster carers should be proportionate to the amount of care provided. Foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- Investigations into allegations or suspicions of harm are handled fairly, quickly and consistently in a way that provides effective protection for the child, and at the same time supports the person who is the subject of the allegation. Fostering services follow the framework for managing cases of allegations of abuse against people who work with children as set out in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 22.9)
- Staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.4)
- There are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes the financial viability of the service, any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1)
- The manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.2)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: 2502331

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Inspectors

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